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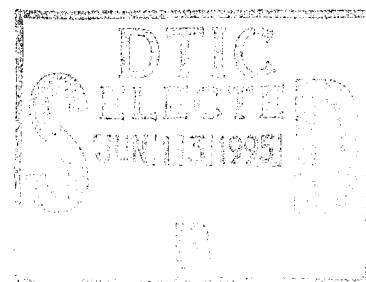
TACTICAL COMMUNICATIONS IN SUPPORT OF THE HURRICANE INIKI RELIEF EFFORT

BY

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Lieutenant Colonel Jan Hicks

Personal Experience Monograph

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Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania

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TACTICAL COMMUNICATIONS IN SUPPORT OF THE
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The greatest honor ever to be bestowed upon me was my selection to command the 125th Signal Battalion, 25th Infantry Division (Light), Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. I had tromped around on many a hilltop and reconnoitered many a potential signal site on the island of Oahu from 1977 to 1981, having been a platoon leader and then company commander in this same battalion. To return to the battalion, in command, was indeed an honor and privilege. I knew the Tropic Lightning Division to be a cohesive, "hoo-ah" light division, full of pride and a very capable fighting force. The months prior to assuming command were filled with dreams of teamwork and well-executed missions. They were also filled with tremendous excitement at returning to the beautiful islands of Hawaii.

Hawaii is truly a paradise, filled with beautiful landscapes, breathtaking views, aromatic flowers everywhere, blue skies, and cool tropical breezes. Mother Nature outdid herself. With the beauty of being a tropical island in the South Pacific, however, is the vulnerability to one of Mother Nature's most potent destructive forces, the hurricane. Hawaiians have a healthy respect for Mother Nature. To that end, hurricane awareness is renewed every summer as the hurricane season approaches. 1992 was no exception. The local news covered how

to prepare for and what to do in case of a hurricane, and local weather forecasters tracked Pacific hurricanes, no matter how remote the possibility of threat to Hawaii. Hurricane Iniki formed up in the South Pacific, slowly approaching Hawaii in a very indirect route, approaching and veering alternately as sort of a tease. But she definitely had the attention of all people in Hawaii. Finally, in early September 1992 Hurricane Iniki bore down on Hawaii.

The alert sounded in the pre-dawn hours on September 11th. The whole division mustered to implement hurricane protection measures. At Helemano Military Reservation, the home of the 125th Signal Battalion and about 650 military families in government housing, the signal battalion began to "button up" as Iniki approached. At first, it appeared that the island of Oahu would be the hardest hit. It was imperative that the signal battalion protect its soldiers, its equipment, and its facilities. More important, however, was our responsibility to assist the residents of Helemano by providing adequate warning, informing them about hurricane protection, and establishing an evacuation shelter.

As "sponsoring unit" for our family housing area, the 125th Signal Battalion was authorized to use its people and equipment, when necessary, to assist residents in situations such as these. The Headquarters & Headquarters Company Commander was charged with establishing an evacuation shelter in the existing, but small, Community Center on Helemano. We installed several skid-

mounted generators to generate electricity for lights, coffee pots, heaters, etc. After installing all the light sets, we gathered up and filled the shelter with cots, blankets, water jugs, MREs, and other necessities. The shelter was ready in about four hours. Of course, getting the word out to residents that a shelter was available and they were encouraged to come to it was a sizeable task. Several non-commissioned officers, as well as the Command Sergeant Major and I, drove the streets of Heleman doing three things. First, we were checking for unsecured items such as garbage cans, toys, or garden tools that could become missiles in hurricane winds. We secured them ourselves when we couldn't find the owners. Second, we provided residents with the latest information we had on Hurricane Iniki, her wind speed, and her estimated time of arrival. Last, we encouraged residents to come to the shelter.

Feeling comfortable with our evacuation shelter preparations, the Sergeant Major and I turned our attention to the preparedness of the battalion proper. It appeared that the non-commissioned officers had taken care of everything. A drive through the motor pool, the adjacent training areas, and the barracks and office areas showed that everything that could fly away had been tied down or secured elsewhere. Windows in the barracks and offices had been taped, pictures had been taken off the walls, bulletin boards had been cleared. We felt ready. At this point we allowed some soldiers to go home to help their own families get ready, even though the Schofield Barracks community

and most surrounding local communities had adequate plans and evacuation centers.

Suddenly, at about 2:00 pm, the winds really started to pick up. The brunt of the storm hit from about 2:00 to 4:00 pm. When the winds died down and the eerie calm settled in, we realized, thankfully, that Oahu had been spared from Iniki's frontal assault.

Our island neighbors on "The Garden Isle" of Kauai had not been as fortunate. While Hurricane Iniki had threatened a direct hit on Oahu, she had veered at the last minute and only hit Oahu with a glancing blow. Instead, she bore down on Kauai and struck with over 225 mph winds, a Category IV hurricane. Kauai had been devastated. Not only were countless homes demolished, simply flattened into rubble or blown away altogether, but basic services of electricity, water, and telephone were out. The Mayor of Kauai and the Governor of Hawaii immediately began to assess Kauai's needs, to determine the level of Hawaii National Guard and United States Army participation.

The next call from the Division Operations Center called all commanders to an emergency meeting. It was at that meeting that the Commanding General told me that the 125th Signal Battalion would be deploying to Kauai to install emergency communications, along with hundreds of other soldiers from the 25th Infantry Division (Light) who were deploying to "make" water, help with clean-up, reconstruct roads, and perform other critical services. I immediately assembled commanders and staff, laid out the

requirement, and let the planning and preparations begin.

The Executive Officer made the battalion conference room available for the S3's Systems Control (SYSCON). The S3 Air was working on deployment, the S4 on controlling the flow of personnel and equipment, the Systems Engineers on the proposed network diagram, the S2 on getting detailed maps of Kauai, the S1 on personnel manifests, and the Battalion Maintenance Officer (BMO) on double-checking the air and sea-worthiness of the fleet. We had the plan in place, and began to deploy the next day.

The best way to describe the 125th Signal Battalion's deployment to Kauai is "by any and all means possible." We steamed to Kauai on the USS Belleau Wood and the division's commercial barges; we flew inside C5s, C141s, and C130s; we flew inside and underneath helicopters. In short, we got to Kauai as quickly as we could, and turned down no "rides." As equipment arrived on Kauai, those links were installed in the tactical network, a sizeable one which had been immediately established on Oahu to link United States Army Pacific (USARPAC) and Commander-in-Chief Pacific (CINCPAC) with the Task Force at 25th Infantry Division (Light). The network was beginning to take shape.

Controlling the flow of personnel and equipment "by any and all means possible" was a challenge. We had a reception committee at the docks and the airport, and kept a close look-out for all in-bound shipments. Because of their long steaming time, the ocean vessels were easier to anticipate, but the air flow was an ever-changing plan. The Commander of Alpha Company was

commander for all battalion personnel as they initially arrived. His orderly room was the central gathering point for all new arrivals and a hub of information for soldiers. The S3 set up SYSCON on Kauai with a tactical satellite radio, FM radio, and a map, and began to plan a detailed communications network on what his assistant S3 described as "an island shaped like a teepee." Most battalion elements set up on the grounds immediately adjacent to the Lihue airport, actually on the grounds of the terminal. Slowly, as more and more equipment and personnel arrived, the soldiers began to build their "signal town" with makeshift sleeping areas, a kitchen, a shower, and other comforts. When they found a lull in the activities, they got a chance to look around, and the devastation was more than any had expected to encounter.

Many people see the effects of hurricane damage on their televisions, but not many people ever actually walk through the remains of a hurricane. Homes were literally reduced to piles of wood. Telephone and power poles were eerily laying down, one after the other on the highways, all having fallen in the same direction as if someone had just off-loaded them there for the telephone and power crews. Only these poles had ragged ends and ragged stumps sticking out of the ground from being broken off at the base by Iniki's winds. The glass windows in store after store were shattered, and quickly applied plastic coverings of every color had been stapled and nailed up to protect from further damage, creating a colorful but very sad picture of the

downtown Lihue streets. Cars had large appliances, trees, and poles crushing their roofs and hoods. Entire orchards of small fruit and nut trees had been wiped out, with whole root balls ripped from the ground. Again, the sight of every tree in the orchard, all laying neatly over with root ball exposed, having all blown down in the same direction, was very unsettling evidence of the trauma that had just hit Kauai. Hardly a tree left standing had been left with limbs. Most were reduced to a ragged stump. Even the majestic trees which for decades had lined both sides of and created a beautiful shade-filled canopy over the road leading to the small town of Koloa had been chopped off as if by a weed-eater. The glaring sun on the road was dramatic evidence of the long-term effects that Kauai would be facing.

Even more tragic, however, than the spoiled beauty of Kauai and the physical damage inflicted on her residents was the personal grief expressed on the faces of our island neighbors. Many had lost everything. Almost no one was left unaffected. There was no way to understand the depth of their grief, so we simply began helping in every way we could and waited for time to heal their pain.

It is much easier to get the backbone portion of a network installed than to find out what the detailed user requirements are in the midst of so many other critical decisions regarding safety, civil services, food and water, and others. In the Assistant Division Signal Officer's very sketchy conversations with county officials, we drew some conclusions about who needed

to talk to whom, and began to draw up detailed plans for meeting what we thought would be our users' requirements. We drew up a prioritized list of customer needs, a document that changed at least twice every four hours initially as we discovered more and more potential customers, and simultaneously built a backbone network around the "teepee" so that all customers could access some point along the backbone. With customer list in hand, key individuals in the battalion set off early each morning to seek out these customers, whether they knew they were customers or not, and install their telephones for them.

We called this the "Mother Goose" approach, and divided the island in to two routes, the eastern route and the southern route. The Executive Officer of Alpha Company took the eastern route. The Command Sergeant Major and I took the southern. Each morning we would meet up with soldiers from every unit in the division. Some came from the Division Artillery, some from the Aviation Brigade, others from the Infantry Brigades and other separate battalions. What they all had in common is that they had been tasked by division to ship over varying numbers of tactical vehicles with tactical, olive drab telephones mounted inside. They were also tasked to provide two drivers, who ended up operating the telephones for our customers in most cases, for each vehicle. It was these vehicles and drivers which formed up behind the Company A XO's and the Battalion Commander's vehicles each morning to begin their trek down either the eastern or southern route to seek out and find their customers and install

their telephones. Usually, we headed each direction with three to four tactical vehicles in tow. Sometimes we knew what or who we were looking for. Sometimes we ran across an activity that was not on the list, but which seemed a good candidate for a telephone. In either case, they were either ticked off the list as their telephone was installed, or they were added to the list. By the fifth or six day, we had tracked down and installed communications for all the users on the list, plus several others who we had accidentally "found" along the way. The backbone network was solid, and the spokes (our customers) off of our communications backbone were now complete. Our priorities now turned to keeping the system going and improving our soldiers' quality of life during this mission.

Once a communications system is up and "cooking," it is very easy for operators to let themselves fall in to a false sense of security that nothing can go wrong. It is the responsibility of commanders and non-commissioned officers to prevent that. The S3 sections pushed hard from the Systems Control (SYSCON) at Lihue. The Assistant Division Signal Officer (ADSO) kept pressing flesh with county and civil officials to ensure all requirements were satisfied and to confirm priorities of communications restoration. Meanwhile, the Battalion Maintenance Officer (BMO), Battalion Maintenance Technician (BMT), and Electronic Maintenance Shop (EMS) kept repair parts and fuel flowing, and ensured that preventive maintenance checks and services (PMCS) were being performed on schedule and to the correct standard. As

the days passed and the mission became more routine, it became more and more important for the Battalion Commander and Command Sergeant Major to frequently visit all of the signal sites to assess morale, ensure that supported activities were providing the agreed-upon comforts such as food, water, and a place to sleep for our soldiers who were supporting them. This kept the Command Sergeant Major and me on the road constantly. We were able to visit our soldiers, talk to our customers to confirm their satisfaction with our service, see the beautiful countryside, observe the changes as the clean-up efforts were underway, and, very importantly, judge the progress of Hawaiian Telephone (HAWTEL) in restoring their own communications links. For it was upon the completion of HAWTEL's restoration efforts that the 125th Signal Battalion could begin to think about going home.

Quality of life for our soldiers was a constant concern. We adopted what came to be called the "XO East and XO West" concept. I put two company XOs under the Company A commander. One XO handled all logistic matters for the area in the east from Lihue to Princeville. The other covered the area from Lihue to Barking Sands on the far west coast. These two XOs handled all food, mail, personal hygiene, and other logistic matters. It worked very well, but was admittedly a luxury that we could not have afforded in wartime, and allowed the platoon leaders to remain on station at their signal sites to handle platoon matters. Of course, one area which presented no problem was making "morale

calls" back home to Oahu. In the Signal Corps, there is always a way. Our soldiers knew every trick, and took full advantage, but never, to my knowledge, to the detriment of the mission. They knew that the first time they "bumped" a customer, morale calls would be terminated. Another very generous service available to soldiers on Kauai was the HAWTEL system back to Oahu, once it was restored, and it was, of course, their first priority. When calls were possible back to Oahu from the pay telephone system, all soldiers could make calls for free. We simply told the operator that we were soldiers, on Kauai for the hurricane relief effort, and our calls were placed at no cost. This free service lasted for almost two weeks, and was very much appreciated. It seemed like we were being thanked by Kauai for our help. The free service came to an end, however, and actually had a good news-bad news angle. The bad news was that the pay phones were no longer free. The good news was that this meant HAWTEL was making rapid progress on the island's commercial communications and the 125th Signal Battalion's time on Kauai was coming to an end.

Anyone using the local phone system could gauge how close we were to going home, because calling on the island, or from island to island, was getting easier and easier. As the end of our mission approached, the excitement grew, and we knew we would be seeing our families soon. The big day came in late September, with numbers of soldiers deploying over a couple of days, and by October 1st we had redeployed the entire battalion to Helemano

Military Reservation. We redeployed by C141 aircraft to Hickam Air Force Base and were greeted by a 25th Infantry Division (Light) reception committee, composed of the Assistant Division Commander for Support, my boss, and the Tropic Lightning Band. Of course, the best part of the reception committee was our families, who showed up to meet their "heroes" no matter what the hour.

When it was all over and I looked back on what the 125th Signal Battalion and 25th Infantry Division (Light) had accomplished on the island of Kauai, it seemed so simple, so easy. We had simply applied our skills as soldiers and communicators to adapt to the situation we faced. Bullets were not flying, no soldier's life was on the line as in war, but the mission was very important. And we were very successful. Now two and a half years later, many details of the communications network are easy to forget. But two things I will never forget. The first is the special moments that occurred between our soldiers and the people of the local community. The second is the wonderful and capable soldiers of the 125th Signal Battalion.

I was privy to many unforgettable things during this mission. One was the Kalaheo Golf Course. Our soldiers needed some high ground to install a relay and a Radio Access Unit (RAU) so that mobile customers on the highway on the south coast of Kauai could get access as they travelled. The caretaker of the Kalaheo Golf Course gave us high ground on one of his greens, with a view overlooking the Pacific. He opened his arms to our

soldiers and treated them like his own kids. He even loaned our soldiers a golf cart to use to run down to the main gate when someone, like the Command Sergeant Major and I, needed to come in. Nearly every night, the soldiers at that signal site would join the caretaker and his family for supper, and would watch the sun set beautifully over the ocean. I was fortunate to join them twice for this event. Another good memory is the hand-painted signs along the highways which said, "Thank You Army" and other words of gratitude. There was the soldier who operated the phone for the Hanapepe Fire Station and Police Headquarters. He was a trained Emergency Medical Technician (EMT), and ended up going on life-saving calls in the fire station's ambulance. Another soldier, at Waimea Fire Station, was never there when we came by. It turns out he was invariably on someone's roof helping tack down heavy plastic tarps, in someone's yard helping pick up heavy limbs and trash, or on the streets of Waimea helping the local community clean up debris. He described his experience to me with tears in his eyes. The "Drag Strip" was an interesting location, and one which only a soldier could pull off. There was a place on the southern coast, on the beach, called Drag Strip on the map. We established a major signal site there, with at least two relays and a Radio Access Unit. The soldiers at that site transformed the site into a little town, with a "lending library" in the wheel-well of their tactical vehicle. That site had many visitors because of its location, and it was impossible to miss it on that beach site. But the most important thing that

happened at this signal site was the relationship that was developed between the soldiers and residents of the little town of Kekaha. One commodity that the Signal Corps always has plenty of is electrical power, generated from large military generators that run our communications equipment. Realizing we had this capability, residents from Kekaha brought refrigerators and freezers to the site to see if they could "plug in." We plugged in several, enough to keep the residents in ice, cold milk, baby formula, and medicines requiring refrigeration. The soldiers were rewarded for their kindness with food, soda pop, and many pats on the back. Perhaps the most memorable thing I encountered, however, was my experience at the Waimea Veteran's Hospital outside the town of Waimea on the southern coast of Kauai. The Command Sergeant Major and I nearly missed the small, old sign with an arrow pointing right to Waimea Veteran's Hospital. At the time, we were on a Mother Goose run on the southern coast. We turned right and found the small hospital. Knowing they would probably want a telephone line, the Command Sergeant Major and the soldiers in the tactical vehicle following us began to remove the military phone in their vehicle and install a tactical telephone wire overhead to the hospital entrance. Meanwhile, I went inside to find someone who could confirm that a phone line was needed and where to put it. I came across an MD who at first was skeptical. "Who can I talk to" he wanted to know. I showed him the list of fire stations, police stations, county court house officials, and other island

locations in our Iniki telephone book. When he noticed that he could call to Oahu and hospitals in Honolulu he immediately said he would take a phone and cleared off a desk to put it on. By then, the Command Sergeant Major had arrived with wire, phone, and soldier in hand. The phone installed, I gave the doctor the correct dialing procedures and he practiced a couple of time, getting local island facilities. Then I showed him the much more complicated method of calling Honolulu. He quickly mastered that, too. By the time we left, he was already consulting with physicians in Honolulu. What was so special about this particular phone was that the 125th Signal Battalion also installed a line for Medical Evacuation (MEDEVAC) helicopters at the Lihue Airport. We know that the Waimea Veteran's Hospital called in a MEDEVAC helicopter the day after we were there, and evacuated an elderly man who had suffered a heart attack. This was something that put the entire mission in focus for my and for the other soldiers of the battalion. We knew what we were doing was important, even life-saving, and we worked hard to perform well.

There were nearly 500 soldiers in the 125th Signal Battalion when I commanded it. Half of those soldiers deployed to Kauai, the other half remained on Oahu to operate the Oahu systems for USARPAC, CINCPAC, and the 25th Infantry Division (Light) Headquarters. While every soldier performed admirable and deserves personal, by-name credit for the job he or she did, I cannot list every one. There are, however, several individuals

whose performance was so stellar that I cannot conclude without mentioning them: Command Sergeant Major Luis Mora; Major Gregg Petersen, the Battalion Executive Officer; Major Jim Kellett, the Assistant Division Signal Officer; Major Patrick Fahey, the Division Automation Officer; Captain Charlie Roberts, Company A Commander; First Sergeant Juan San Nicolas, Company A First Sergeant; Captain Matthew Mulqueen, the S3; 1LT Susan Escallier, the S3 Air; 1LT Scott Scales, the Assistant S3; 2LT Mark Gaylo, the Systems Engineering Officer; CW2 Timothy Kirkland, the S3 Engineering Technician; 2LT Becky Kanis, 2LT Lucy Deile, and 1LT Marcus Reese, platoon leaders; SFC William Truhitte and SFC Fred Joyner, platoon sergeants; Mr. Wayne Raybon, Communications-Electronics Command (CECOM) Logistic Assistance Representative (LAR); and many, many others whose expertise and personal pride in their performance enabled the 125th Signal Battalion to respond to this mission with such excellence.

Thriving on teamwork and team efforts, I find that it was particularly meaningful for me to command the 125th Signal Battalion during this important time, when all soldiers in the battalion and the 25th Division could pull together for the common goal of helping our island neighbors on Kauai. In twenty years of service in the United States Army Signal Corps, I had never been called upon to apply my skills in war. The experience during the relief effort from Hurricane Iniki, however, will go down in my career, and probably in my life, as one of the most important, meaningful, and fulfilling things I have done or ever

will do. Not only is the 125th Signal Battalion's performance a credit to the 25th Infantry Division (Light) and the Signal Corps, but it stands in evidence of the effectiveness with which the United States Army can apply its people and its equipment in times other than war. And this time, it was in a very special time and place. It was our own neighbors. It was our own countrymen.